CHAPTER 12

Television and Aerobic Sport: Empowerment and Patriarchy in *Denise Austin's Daily Workouts*

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Traditionally, television coverage of sport has been dominated by coverage of what are considered "male" sporting events. More prevalent, it seems, is women's presence in television sport if their endeavors are less competitive, and/or the focus is on weight loss and "looking good," as opposed to athleticism. In particular, aerobic exercise classes, which use music to guide full-body movements that work the cardiovascular system, are commonly portrayed by the media as innovative means of losing "excess fat" and shedding "unwanted pounds," while promising a new physical appearance that will make one more sexually attractive and ultimately more desirable. While the media focus on sex and sex appeal in aerobics has toned down since the 1980s (Duffy and Rhodes, 1993), sexual rhetoric continues to be embedded in the overall aerobic media discourse.

This analysis critiques the aerobic discourse on Lifetime Television's *Denise's Fit & Lite* and *Denise Austin's Daily Workout*. Specifically, it looks at how this contemporary example of aerobic media text wants to reinforce traditional perceptions suggesting that aerobic exercise ("aerobics") is not an athletic activity, only a part of an overall weight loss regime for women. It discusses how these two texts maintain patriarchal definitions of feminine beauty and sexuality.

L. K. Fuller (ed.), *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender*
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Aerobics: Sports versus Hobby

In 1968, a former Air Force medical officer, Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper introduced the concept of using exercise to build and maintain a healthy cardiovascular system. His research, conducted for and on young men, demonstrates that one can lose weight while engaging in exercise that improves circulation, increases lung capacity, and helps develop flexible blood vessels (Cooper, 1968, 1977). It led to the popularization of aerobic "dance," a 1970s activity requiring participants to follow strict choreography set to music (Brick, 1996), and "modern aerobics" led to a growth in interest and participation in exercising one's heart to music. But it was women, and not men, as Cooper originally thought, who became the primary participants of the sport.

Classes were full of highly choreographed routines, many incorporating sophisticated dance-like and sometimes unsafe movements (Duffy and Rhodes, 1993). Male participation was often encouraged by marketing aerobics as an alternative (Dean, 1987). Yet, as women are the primary participants of aerobic exercise, it has become less a "serious" athletic activity and more of a hobby (Feder, 1994). While aerobics is considered "dance" by some, it is, in reality, "movement oriented athletic conditioning . . . that coordinates upper body movement and lower body movement" (Brick, 1996, p.3). Like many sports, aerobics focuses on muscle strength, endurance, and flexibility. Unlike most male-driven sports, however, it is mostly non-competitive (Firebaugh, 1989). As a result, both critics and participants have come to usually identify aerobic exercise simply as a weight-loss activity for women.

Aerobics and Feminism

The 1970s saw the entrance of more women into competitive and noncompetitive sports. However, the fact that aerobics is a female dominated, noncompetitive sport, as well as an activity used to promote weight-loss, has led some feminists to have multiple and often contradictory views about how feminist ideals may be both reflected and rejected in the sport (Real, 1999). For some, aerobics allows "command, control, and mastery over one's body, and consequently, one's life" (Eskes, Duncan, and Miller, 1998, p.319), while for others, such as MacNeill (1998), it "helps to uphold the feminine values of non-aggressiveness, non-competitiveness, and gracefulness" despite the liberating aspects of women's participation (p.207).

The 1990s unveiled a new look for aerobic exercise, with less dance-oriented choreography, so current routines are generally considered safer because they emulate "real life movements" using muscles the way as they would be in typical daily activities (Duffy and Rhodes, 1993, p.55). The majority of aerobic participants, as well as instructors, continue to be women. Recent studies show that "[d]espite talk of target heart rate and increased endurance, most aerobic [participants] exercised primarily to get slimmer—not healthier" (Duffy and Rhodes, 1993, p.52).

The fitness industry has experienced tremendous economic growth and social acceptance, thanks to marketing experts like Jack Lalanne and celebrities like Jane Fonda, Richard Simmons, Suzanne Sommers, and Cindy Crawford, who were able to use mass media as a means of converting their personal fitness and weight-loss regimes into commercial successes. Women continue to be their primary target. Marketing strategies have led to the mass commercialization of weight loss products, such as informational guides, diet books, audio/video workout tapes, and nutritional supplements (Markula 1995). It has also created a multibillion dollar sports apparel industry, which includes footwear and exercise clothing (Neporent, 1994). While this clothing is theoretically for comfort, much of the sports apparel available today is designed to make a woman appear more sexually appealing while wearing it. Navel-baring sports bras, thongs, and short spandex shorts are designed to accent and highlight a woman's physique while they are participating in a sporting event. Often, the marketing strategies for this apparel emphasize the "new" and more "desirable" woman, one who will achieve weight-loss goals.

Current fitness experts argue that aerobics is changing by focusing more on overall health benefits, as opposed to simply losing weight in order to achieve the "ideal" body type (Duffy and Rhodes, 1993). Still, aerobics continues to be packaged by the media as primarily a weight-loss activity. Media texts suggest doing aerobics will lead to higher self-esteem and social acceptance if one achieves a thinner, more muscular, and more sexually desirable body as the end result of participation.

Feminist Media Rhetorical Criticism

In order to define the ideals with which women must negotiate while engaging aerobic media discourses, one must turn to a rhetorical analysis of the media text. According to Sillar and Groenbeck (2001), "Rhetoric, however defined specifically, always has been concerned with

relationships between discourses and their power to influence or control information, identity, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors" (p.31). Rhetoric incorporates humanly created artifacts or symbols, including performances, films, and advertisements, in order to understand "(how) people construct the worlds on which they live and how those worlds make sense to them" (Foss, Foss, and Griffin, 1999, p.7).

Markula (1995) poses that, "Women's relationships with the media image are contradictory: they struggle to obtain the ideal body, but they also find their battles ridiculous" (p.424). Popular magazines, marketing aerobics as an activity that women can engage in not only to be healthy, but to also be sexier, highlight masculinist ideals aerobics can reinforce.

Television, Rhetoric, and Aerobics

Television brings to the private sphere what are traditionally public events, thus creating a paradox for women. On the one hand, women are invited to become participants in a forum that they may not usually be able to access; on the other, while women may benefit from participating from their homes, they are not being asked to leave this domestic sphere and enter a more public realm. By doing aerobics alone in the private space of her home, the would-be athlete is unable to publicly challenge these contradictory social messages.

Aerobic videos and television programming also highlight the power of visual rhetoric when engaging in aerobic exercise. Based on their research of a popular 1980s Canadian television aerobics program, *The 20 Minute Workout*, Kagan and Morse (1988) pose that many televised exercise routines use production techniques to emphasize and potentially enhance a woman's appearance. For example, camera work such as tilts (up and down) and pans (moving the camera straight across from one location to another) can give a single image multiple meanings dependent on how that image is being shown. Close-ups, and editing techniques can make an aerobic video seem as if it is intended *only for watching* women engaging in aerobic exercise, as opposed to encouraging participation in the exercise itself. The gaze can relate to the instructor's body, inviting looking, as opposed to participating, seeing her as a sexual object and heightening her sex appeal (Andres, 1987).

Television, Aerobics, and the Promise

Duffy and Rhodes (1993) claim that the fitness industry of the 1990s produced less sexualized media representations of aerobic exercise.

Still, the media continues to confirm the perceived relationship between aerobics, weight-loss, and becoming more sexually desirable, as reflected in contemporary exercise videos that promise the participant-viewer a thinner, better, and more sexually appealing body if she follows the instructor's directions as seen as the videotape. The instructor, who asserts that those who follow her exercise and diet regime will obtain the "ideal" physique, makes this promise in two ways: While her instructions and other taped utterances discuss the physical benefits, the promise is also made *visually* by how she both role-models her looks in front of the camera, as well as how television directors decide to shoot her.

Sampling analyses of the television fitness programs *Denise's Fit & Lite* and *Denise Austin's Daily Workout* demonstrates how this contemporary daily fitness program's rhetorical strategies employed by the show's creators provide contradictory "truths" that women must contend with when engaging these televisual texts. It identifies rhetorical strategies intended to empower women through motivating them to take control of their health and well-being through aerobic exercise, as well as identifying, in the same text, those rhetorical strategies that encourage aerobic activity by reinforcing patriarchal values.

Empowerment and Patriarchy: Working out "With" Denise Austin

Unlike the retail video, which engages the participant-viewer in an unchanging relationship over time, daily television workouts rely on a certain amount of variety in order to engage viewers. Instructors are less likely to rely on their celebrity status, focusing more on their aerobic workouts as being easy and interesting enough for viewers to follow on a daily basis. Routines change, as do clothing and hairstyle of the instructor herself and, in some cases, the space in which the instructor teaches. However, the goal is the same: to provide guidance and advice on how to participate in aerobic activity.

Denise Austin's Daily Workout airs on the Lifetime Television for Women Cable Network. Owned by Carole Black, it is a network dedicated to providing advocacy and support as well as entertainment and information to women (McAdams, 1999). The network's official web site (Lifetime.com) states that its mission is to use "the power of the media to make a positive difference in the lives of women"; according to Brady (2001), it enjoys a media penetration rate of approximately 85 million homes. Austin also has her own web site (lifetimetv.com/shows/denise/meet/denise.html).

Most *Daily Workout* episodes follow an earlier Austin show titled *Denise's Fit & Light*, dedicated to teaching less strenuous exercise routines. Austin is both producer and host of both programs. A licensed fitness expert and author, she defines herself as a mother over 40 (Austin, 2001) whose goal has "always been to target women who want to stay in shape" (Anderson-Parrado, 2000, p.24). Each half-hour program airs weekdays back-to-back from 7–8 am, featuring Denise Austin instructing a 20-minute routine that the viewer can exercise along with, thus participating in the exercise "with" her. The routines include low/high impact aerobics, interval aerobics, step aerobics, and more recently, boxing and cardio-kickboxing (a combination of aerobic exercise routines and various forms of martial arts). Stretching, weight training, and/ or abdominal exercises follow the aerobic workouts.

Methodology

A random time period was chosen for recording the episodes for this study. The episodes selected for this analysis were aired between December 13 to December 20, 2001. Those episodes dedicated to aerobics were included in the following analysis, while those episodes focusing solely on weight training or yoga were not. Interestingly, during the time period that these episodes were recorded, the Lifetime Network promoted Denise Austin's shows as ways to "reduce stress during the holidays" as well as "stay in shape for the New Year." However, the *Fit & Lite* and *Daily Workout* episodes made no reference to the holiday season.

It is important to note that, when applying rhetorical approaches to television, critics must question why the writers/producers of the medium choose the point of view from which they are discussing the subject matter. It is up to the critic to deconstruct what the creators of the text are saying through their choice of dialogue as well as overall production values (Vande Berg and Wenner, 1991). It is within this context that the text is being analyzed. The data is organized into three categories. The first, *rhetoric of empowerment*, includes comments made about women's health, strength, or other elements that appear to support the idea or "truth" that women can be empowered while participating in aerobic exercise. The second, *rhetoric of promise*, includes those rhetorical devices reinforcing the "contract" between the instructor and the participant-viewer that promises physical and/or emotional changes based on patriarchal ideals, which reinforce the

idea that women should be thin, toned, and sexy. The third category, *rhetoric of commodification*, consists of rhetoric that links these conflicting values of aerobic exercise to the fitness industry. Within each of these categories, the linguistic and visual rhetorical strategies employed by the creators of the text will be discussed.

The Rhetoric of Empowerment

Austin begins each televised workout by reminding the participant-viewer that she is their "personal trainer," bringing their workout into their own "bedroom or living room . . . wherever it is that [they] exercise" (12/18). There are no people on camera besides Austin during the aerobic workout. She directly addresses the television audience by directly speaking into the camera, a production technique that serves to establish a seemingly "one-on-one" relationship with the participant-viewer. Participant-viewers can usually see most of Austin's body, if not her whole frame, enabling them to follow her movements as she teaches. Throughout her instruction, she engages in what Delin (2001, p.71) refers to as aerobic "comments" that are made specifically to create "interpersonal relationships between the participant and the instructor." Some of Austin's comments are intended to motivate viewers to participate in the aerobic routine: "As long as you do something for you . . . even if its for a couple of minutes, if you're just starting out, soon you'll be able to do the whole show. That will be great! What an accomplishment!" (12/14).

There are other comments that intend to inspire women to (re)claim a healthy control over their bodies. For example, she reminds viewers that participating in aerobics can improve their quality of life, explaining that it will get oxygen flowing and help their bodies to have energy for the day. Doing aerobics is "doing something healthy" by fighting heart disease. She urges them to get rid of the negativity, to get aggressive. During high-intensity kickboxing she tells participants to "Feel strong, empower your body!" (12/13). Constantly, she encourages participant-viewers to challenge themselves: "YOU are better than you think you are, so do it!"

Austin also seeks to educate participants during the show, telling them that she is educated in kinesiology, nutrition, and aerobic instruction. During each episode, she discusses proper technique, safety precautions, and explains the importance of engaging in specific aerobic patterns.

The Rhetoric of Promise

In addition to empowering rhetoric in the Denise Austin televisual texts come assertions claiming that viewer-participants can burn fat, lose weight, be sexy, and thus feel better if they do aerobics. It is a contract she strikes up with them, promising that if they follow her directions, they will see these specific results. For example, during one *Fit & Lite* episode (December 13, 2001), Austin announced that doing aerobics would increase energy, elevate moods, and help one look and feel great, adding that looking and feeling great would "improve that self esteem." Throughout her programs, she refers to her aerobic routines as "fat burning," "blasting" fat away.

Reshaping the body is also part of the promise. During a low-impact aerobic routine, Austin tells participant-viewers that they should consistently do aerobics because, "That is when you see that change in your body" (12/14). During interval training, she tells participant-viewers that they are, "Going to see new muscle groups" if they continue that particular routine (12/19). Sometimes she targets specific body parts, such as telling participants that if they lift their knees, they will, "Get rid of that gut . . . no more pot belly!" (12/14). In some cases, she highlights the body's potential for sex appeal, promising that, for example, boxing will make their arms not only "nice and shapely" but also "sexy looking" (12/18). During another episode she refers to "cottage cheese" thighs as one of the biggest problem areas for women; then, during a high-intensity aerobic routine, she discusses reshaping thighs "to the perfect size," claiming that if one did the specific exercises she was doing, she would have "sexy thighs" and nice looking legs (ibid.)

Visually, the contract is further reinforced. Austin instructs each workout in sports apparel that is skin tight, low-cut, and oftentimes extremely revealing. She often wears extremely short spandex or mini 'biker' shorts with a tight-fitting, cleavage revealing halter-top. Her flat abdomen, including her navel, is exposed. Once in a while she will sport a high-cut body suit, revealing the full length of her legs. Not wearing tights or sleeves, only socks and athletic shoes, she is extremely sun-tanned, but has no apparent tan-lines on her body.

While the camera captures her movements in medium or long shots, there are a few brief instances where the camera gazes at her body. For example, during one interval training session, the camera focused for a few seconds on her breasts as she reached over to demonstrate a move. During a *Daily Workout Fat-Burning Rock Aerobics* (12/18), the camera moved in close to her body and slowly

panned upward from below her waist to her chest as she talked about how aerobics would transform one's physique. While these instances last no more than a few seconds then that, her body appears fragmented and objectified.

All this takes place within the public sphere not only of television, but also at the location from which her shows are being taped. Austin does not televise her programs from a sound stage or an aerobics studio; instead, she tapes from various vacation spots in North America and the Caribbean, where she exercises on beaches or surrounded by lush vegetation or majestic mountains. In effect, she is creating a three dimensional experience through television. By showing her exercise at locations such as Boca Raton, Disney World Resorts in Florida, the Bahamas, Jamaica, or exclusive health spas of northern California, the camera serves as a point of entry, an entrance into a world of luxury and relaxation. Austin invites them to experience these locations as they exercise from the private sphere of their home. She is offering yet another promise: exercise with her, if viewer-participants too will also share the experience of being at these various resorts, without having to leave home. They appear to be given entry into these public locales, even though Austin promises to bring her exercise programs directly to their private homes.

The Rhetoric of Commodification

Not only does taping Austin's shows at various resort locations promise the participant-viewer entry into a public, albeit idealistic, place, they also commercialize the aerobic environment. These scenic backdrops make her programs advertisements. In each episode, Austin introduces the location, often sounding like a commercial spokesperson, such as: "Isn't it beautiful behind me? That's the Grand Floridian. It's a great beach and spa . . . it's a perfect place to come and visit and stay and oooh, soothe your body" (12/18). The episodes taped at the Disney Resorts featured Austin wearing athletic apparel with the Disney logo. It was not her body, but the Disney trademark that was being featured visually, as the Disney-brand apparel provided more coverage than Austin's other outfits.

Austin not only advertises the locations from which she is instructing, she also serves as a commercial spokesperson for a variety of products and services related to the fitness industry. These commercials air regularly during each episode, some at the beginning of the program, others dispersed throughout the half-hour spot. She recommends drinking Dannon™ Natural Spring Water as part of a healthy

daily routine as she sits on a weight bench surrounded by dumbbells. In another advertisement, she "treats her family to a little fun" by blending healthy shakes for them in an Osterizer™ blender—exposing her domesticity, as her husband and children sit by the fire and play while she blends their snack in their kitchen.

The longest and most sophisticated advertising is a commercial for the LPG™ Cellulite Treatment Center, featuring Denise Austin exercising in what appears to be a home. She is in front of a giant television screen on which we can see her exercising. The ad then shows her lying down on a table while a masseuse appears to break down her cellulite by using a handheld machine on her thighs. Contrary to her promises of obtaining "sexy thighs" by following her aerobics routine, the advertisement suggests that her workout is not effective enough to reshape her own thighs.

Toward the end of each half-hour episode of both *Fit & Lite* and *Daily Workout* a specific video series, titled *Denise Austin's Short Cuts*, is advertised as providing maximum weight loss and body reshaping results "over minimum amounts of time." This ad is followed by the final segment of each episode, dedicated to providing specific advice about exercise and products. Sometimes Austin will answer questions and demonstrate fitness techniques in immediate response to a question posed on camera, but it is unclear if questioners are aerobics participants or spectators. During these segments, she does not advertise products, but is still advertising her expertise as she guides the person through a specific exercise, much as one would expect during a personal training session in a health club or fitness center.

Other episodes feature a final segment titled *Denise's Daily Wisdom*, which are also dedicated to answering what she defines as "Commonly Asked Questions" about health and fitness. While it also packages her as an expert in the field, she will sometimes complement her tips with product promotion. One *Daily Wisdom* segment, for example, features Austin discussing back pain and posture from what appears to be the staircase of her home. She also recommends the use of shoe inserts, and names the specific brand she likes to use. Following the brief monologue, Austin reminds participant-viewers that they deserve to feel good, be healthy, and ends by wishing them a great day.

Concluding Discussion

While the Denise Austin programs focus considerably on the physical and emotional health benefits of engaging in aerobic activity, the

series discourse also contain rhetorical strategies confirming patriarchal values of femininity. These televisual texts, marketed toward women, contain verbal and visual references to what masculinist ideals identify as the beautiful woman: thin, toned, and sexy. Austin herself reinforces this value system with her sporadic use of the term "sexy," as well as her continuous promises of a better looking body, or, at least, some better looking body parts. Her wardrobe, while worn to instruct women, exposes the parts of her body that appear to invite a "gaze" from audiences. Her clothing reveals body parts that are considered beautiful and sexy according to patriarchal values, including long muscle-toned legs, thin thighs, a flat stomach, firm bosom, and thin, graceful arms.

While the camera work occasionally fragments her body, it is Denise Austin's comments about individual and problematic body parts that tend to cause greater objectification. Most of the time the show is produced to allow participant-viewers to see most of Austin's body in its entirety, but much of this visual rhetoric juxtaposes the comments about specific body parts. While attempting to motivate, the fitness celebrity points out body parts that are problematic or that need to be enhanced. This verbal fragmentation of the body also objectifies it.

Clearly, both *Daily Workout* and *Fit & Lite* are marketing tools for the tourism industry. Furthermore, the show's use of these exotic backdrops, combined with Austin's invitations to join her at these locations, tends to reinforce the definition of aerobics as a recreational activity. Other advertisements reflect the role of aerobics in the overall fitness industry. Although most of the product advertising airing throughout her shows does not discuss aerobics specifically, Austin's promised results from the various aerobic sports she teaches are further highlighted. Her visibility in these advertisements reminds audiences of the contract she has with them, even if she is not exercising. She is still telling participant-viewers to follow her example. Participant-viewers are encouraged to buy not only into her ideas and expertise, but also to buy into the overall fitness industry.

Meanwhile, contradictions are evident between what Austin says while teaching aerobics versus what the products she endorses have to offer. While she promises results from her workout, her endorsements perpetuate the idea that additional products and services must also be purchased in order to ensure these results. Thus, participant-viewers must contend with the series' overall mediated messages that selling aerobics as the way to achieve the perfect body, and selling the idea that no matter how much aerobic exercise they do, it will still not be

enough to reach the beautiful and sexy physique they should be striving for. They are encouraged to engage in aerobic exercise to improve both physically and emotionally, and are congratulated in their efforts. But they are also being told that what they do will never be enough unless they purchase products and services perfecting the already "positive" results they have achieved through aerobic exercise.

The language used in the Denise Austin television shows indicates that the definition of aerobics endorsed by the media has changed from dance and celebrity enterprise to fitness and health. It also demonstrates that, despite this change, aerobics is still presented by the media primarily as means to look thinner and be more sexually appealing. While the media texts analyzed here provide messages promoting aerobics as a tool for female empowerment, these messages conflict, and as the preceding discussion suggests, are often overshadowed by the fitness industry's attempts to sell ideas, products, and services promising women a body and self-image reflecting patriarchal standards. It is these truths that women must contend with when engaging the mediated discourse of aerobic exercise.

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